

## SO WHAT IS MUSIC ANYWAY?

Asking someone to define music is like asking the average person to define what gravity is. Like gravity, music is so closely connected to all of us and has such an effect on all of us that trying to understand what it is can be quite difficult. Over the centuries many definitions for music have been put forth by musicians and composers. Although many of these definitions are decent definitions, most have fallen short of a precise and complete definition. Let's begin our study of music by looking at some of these definitions and observing how they fall short. By doing so, this will help us to discover a more complete definition of the subject we wish to study.

One such definition that falls short is to define music by its "material substance" (i.e., what it's made out of). Simply calling music "sound" or "vibrations of air" is not really saying what music "is". For example, if we define a chair as "a thing made of wood" we have not really said what a chair "is". Just as not all things made of wood are chairs, so too not all things made from vibrations of air are music. Take for example a rock slide. A rockslide produces a large number of vibrations in the air but one would not call the sound that a rock slide makes "music".

Another definition that falls short is one that defines music by its parts. If we were to define music as "rhythm and pitch" we would simply be listing its parts and would still not have said anything about what music "is". Let's take our example of a chair again. If we define a chair as "a thing with four legs" we haven't really stated what a chair "is". Just as not everything with four legs is a chair, so too not everything that has rhythm and pitch is music. Take for example a cooking timer that has just gone off. Its beeping sound may have a pitch and it may have a rhythm and yet one does not consider the sound it produces to be "music".

A very common definition of music that falls short of a complete definition is "organized sound". Although we are getting closer to a complete definition with this one, it still only states what the material substance of music is. Morse code, for example is "organized sound" but no one would consider Morse code to be music. So what is a more precise and complete definition of music?

For any definition to be complete it must contain a statement about the "end" or "purpose" of the thing being defined. Let's take a final look at the definition of a chair. If we define a chair as "a thing made of wood that has four legs and is used for sitting on", we have included a statement about a chair's "end" or "purpose". The "end" or "purpose" of a chair is to be sat on. We can conclude from the above that if we want to have a precise and complete definition of music we must first discern what music's purpose is.

## MUSIC'S PURPOSE

Since man's existence he has used music for many different purposes. The one unifying factor in all of these purposes is that they involve the moving of the emotions. Let's briefly go over some of the main purposes music has been used for throughout the history of man.

Probably the most basic of these is the purpose of entertainment. Music entertains us by giving pleasure to those who hear it. Whether it's music on the radio or TV, in a play or in a movie, in each

of these instances we receive pleasure from listening to music because it moves our emotions and changes how we feel. A cheerful tune, for example, can brighten our mood when we are feeling down. Calm music can soothe one's anger or stress. Certain music can frighten us or even make us cry. Man by his nature derives pleasure from having his emotions affected.

Music has also been used in time of war. Its purpose was to rally the troops and to plant fear into the minds and hearts of the enemy. This happens once again through the moving of man's emotions.

Then of course we have the role music plays during social events. For example, the purpose of music during a Fourth of July celebration, college graduation, or a parade, is to create a shared emotional experience or atmosphere which unites the people who are partaking in the event.

And finally, there is the use of music in religion. Throughout history we find that religion and music are common to all cultures and peoples. Furthermore, all cultures have used music as a tool in their religious ceremonies. They all recognized the same fact: music has the ability to move human emotions. Sometimes religions have used music to excite the emotions, and at other times to calm them. An example of music used to calm the emotions would be the Gregorian chant of the Roman Catholic Church

The above are just a few of the uses music has had throughout history. Although music can be seen to have many different purposes, the main thing to take note of is that all of these purposes share one thing in common – the moving of the emotions. For our definition of music to be complete it must therefore include a statement about its ability to move human emotions.

## UNIQUE TO MANKIND

Since music seems to be all about moving the emotions, and because emotions are unique to mankind, it follows that music must therefore also be unique to mankind. A horse for example, can hear the vibrations of air but they cannot be moved to tears like a human would when listening to the exact same piece of music.

What's even more astounding than music being unique to mankind is the fact that it affects all people in the same manner. A sad piece of music, for example, is considered sad by any person, from any culture, from any time period. In other words, no one can hear a piece of sad music and think it sounds happy. Because of this truly amazing fact, music is able to be communicated from person to person with an understanding. Music is therefore in essence a kind of language. It is a universal language that we all speak – the language of emotions.

At this point, we have ascertained a sufficient amount of knowledge of what music is to be able to give a more complete definition. The definition of music used in this course will be as follows: **music is the universal language of emotions communicated through intelligently ordered sounds consisting of rhythm and pitch.** (The first half of this definition was arrived at through common sense and reasoning in this lesson. The second half of the definition will become clear over the period of this course.)